



The Outsider

Richard Wright

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"Wright presents a compelling story of a black man's attempt to escape his past and start anew in Harlem. Cross Damon is a man at odds with society and with himself, a man who hungers for peace but who brings terror and destruction wherever he goes.

As Maryemma Graham writes in her Introduction to this edition, with its restored text established by the Library of America, "The Outsider is Richard Wright's second installment in a story of epic proportions, a complex master narrative designed to show American racism in raw and ugly terms ... The stories of Bigger Thomas ... and Cross Damon bear an uncanny resemblance to many contemporary cases of street crime and violence. There is also a prophetic note in Wright's construction of the criminal mind as intelligent, introspective, and transformative."

In addition to the Introduction by Maryemma Graham, this edition includes a notes section by Arnold Rampersad."

The Outsider Details

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Nood-Lesse says

"Io non so neppure quello che faccio, infatti non quello che voglio io faccio, ma quello che detesto"

Chiesi che mi inviassero l'elenco dei libri lasciati dal defunto Cross Damon. Li ricevetti prima di sera ed ebbi di cosa essere soddisfatto. Avevo trovato la prima vera traccia ed erano i suoi Nietzsche, Hegel, Jaspers, Heidegger, Husserl, Kierkegaard, Dostoevskij.. Capii d'avere a che fare con un uomo avvelenato da idee malsane".

Al centro dell'opera di Wright c'è l'individuo con le sue pulsioni. È interessante come quell'individuo venga contrapposto alla società che lo ospita. Wright militò nel partito comunista da cui si distaccò nel 1942. Le impronte di quel cammino si ritrovano nelle pagine in cui il protagonista va alla ricerca della propria assoluta libertà. A costui la vita ha riservato una seconda possibilità; viene creduto morto e può rifarsi una vita altrove. Già... si può fuggire dai propri affetti, dai propri impegni, dal proprio lavoro, ma come evadere dalle sbarre del proprio cuore?

-Perché certa gente è destinata come Giobbe a vivere un'interminabile dibattito con la propria visione della vita? Perché certi cuori sentono l'esistenza come un affronto e le condizioni di essa li umiliano?

A Pag. 20 Viene chiesto la protagonista:

-Perché hai letto tutti quei libri?

-Cercavo una cosa, risponde

-Che cosa?

-Non lo so, ammette tristemente lui

Vi siete mai chiesti perché avete letto così tanti libri?

C'è una cosa peggiore di non trovare che cosa si cerca, è non sapere che cosa si sta cercando.

Babydoll says

Richard Wright's 'The Outsider' is a phenomenal novel that draws the reader to the dark side of the life of the main character Cross Damon. This extraordinary character introduces the reader to a man who lives outside the norms, expectations, rules, and laws of society. He embraces no ideological, societal or governmental theories, and he claims no religious principles. Wright allows the reader to imagine the life of an individual who has little emotional regard for his family, who constantly succumbs to his desire for women, and whose destructive ideologies decide the fate of his life. This intriguing page turning novel will appeal to the reader from beginning to end. I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys classic African-American literature.

Regan says

I had a hard time with this one. I wanted to like Cross but I couldn't stand his character most of the time. He was *extremely* intelligent which was probably the only thing I admired about him. Besides that, I did not like the darker side of him that entailed him hitting his wife, abandoning his kids, lying to everyone he met, and murdering *four* men.

The writing was actually pretty good and only once was I really unable to keep reading- if you read the book, it's the part where Cross talks for maybe twenty pages about his viewpoints. It was probably important to understanding his character but I just couldn't read it. It was too long and boring.

And finally, the book seemed to be teeming with important themes but none in particular really stuck out to me. Mostly it just left me feeling extremely sad, angry, and confused.

Harry Louis says

This is one of Wright's most amazing works. I could not put it down.

Ofelia Hunt says

I enjoyed this book. The first part has an amazing tension that is very driving and admirable and makes me want to write heavily-plotted novels. Toward the end, the novel becomes a little bogged down in the specifics of ideas/philosophies/etc... which is okay but sometimes I felt like I already understood much of it from the first part and that it was only there to make sure I got it just in case I happened to be sort of dense. But that was okay. It's still good.

Patrick Andrews says

Richard Wright's "The Outsider" tells the story of Cross Damon, a black man living in Chicago around 1950 who, after a narrowly escaping death in a freak 'El' derailment, lets the world believe he is dead and leaves for New York City to live as a ghost, a non-entity, an outsider. But when he gets to NY he finds his past life's habits impossible to leave behind. Damon, an intellectual prone to obsessive thought and bouts of self-loathing, is borne immutably down the path he had tread his entire life, only now with the full understanding of its isolation, despair, and violence.

One of the most frightening books I've read since, well, Richard Wright's "Native Son", this book examines the difficulty of changing one's lot and the futility and danger of trying to do right through criminal, nefarious means. And above that, it's a beautifully written, fully self-aware novel about the existence of those who never seem to fit.

Abdi says

great work of potent relevance to us today, a timeless classic!! loved it!!!

Robyn says

Great book that not only deals with race, but also deals with man feeling free enough to behave however he

wants without thinking about the consequences. Interesting how his character develops from a man trapped in his life, to a man completely free and then back towards a life where his actions have effects on everything and everyone else around him. I would recommend this book.

kerri says

This is by far Richard Wright's best book. It is based on Sartre and Camus, but Wright adapts the questions of existentialism to the slums of 1930s black Chicago. I recommend it to anyone who likes the bizarre, the eerie, and the provocative.

Jonfaith says

I unfortunately read this at a time when it must have been incomprehensible. Dewed with youth, affecting an angst and still noshing fast food while often remaining awake for 24 hours at a clip. I only recall two episodes: the queue for the train and the encounter (molestation?) and the final slugfest of the ideologues. Perhaps my latest trek will lead me back to this door.

Raul Clement says

Still have 100 pages left, but I feel pretty safe rating this five stars. I have yet to read a book by Wright I didn't love. He writes so clearly and engagingly he can make even dense philosophical passages breezy.

This is not for you if you don't like novels of ideas or novels that deal with political, social, and ideological issues. It's essentially Wright's take on an existential novel. The books that it seems most similar to are *The Stranger* and *Crime and Punishment*. It's much more interesting and expansive than Camus though (never been a big fan).

That's not to say that it's purely abstract. Like my favorite existentialist writing, it does all the character, scene, and sensory work necessary to give lifeblood to its ideas. Still, if you're looking for a more traditional narrative, I'd advise *Native Son*, the first half of *Black Boy*, or some of his short fiction.

R.K. Byers says

i can't remember the last time i was so happy that a book finally ended.

Ben says

I must admit, I unknowingly stood unprepared as this book emotionally and essentially intruded upon me. I

now feel an acute fear in realizing the damage. It will likely haunt me, or dictate any future understanding I have of myself, and may signify a definitive point in my everlasting development. Forgive me, as the following will not implicate the kind of perversity which this work played in my mind. I have to embrace it before you can. And this may never come to pass.

History will undoubtedly memorialize Richard Wright as a race writer, alongside Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, etc. These writers speak for the scorned and neglected of America. Their experiences as black intellectuals beckons them to dictate their ideas through the perspective of their lives. In a sense, their stories and ideas symbolize the plight of the marginalized, the systemic outcast, the undesired - the proverbial black sheep, a cliché indicative of more than just the color of its wool. But again, this is not a perspective of transcendence, since cultural heritage should be gloriously celebrated, proudly embraced and joyously proclaimed. Yet understanding this experience holistically, as an experience shared, in varying degrees, by many outsiders, leads to a communal bliss of brotherhood discovered in the depths of despair and hatred.

Of course, America acknowledges these outsiders, yet in most cases they choose to confer a comforting identity upon them. Insiders mechanically grind through life oblivious to the true consciousness of these people. Why? Because the insider desires a bearable and clean conscience; not the kind of conscience free of guilt, but the kind of conscience blissfully ignorant of the existence of outsiders who feel disenfranchised in a world preaching brotherhood and equality.

Wright compacts the psyche of the outsider into his main character, Cross Damon, who, in the very fabric of his name, embodies a dualistic conflict of good and evil. Yet Cross disregards the pretense of good and evil, bars caging the human psyche, and seizes his desire for a mold-shattering freedom. Rather than good, there exists himself, and rather than evil, there exists the world. And vice versa. Because of his disillusionment, his enlightened vision into the nature of man's worldly existence, he learns to hate both that which lies within him and that which the powerful constructed around him. He needs neither angel nor demon to aid him. He would rather live without needing them.

Like Dostoevsky, Wright possesses a keen insight into the psyche of his characters. *Native Son* struck the world dumb as it witnessed the psychological depth of a man we might have carelessly called a simple beast. Now Cross Damon, notably unconcerned with the color of his skin, exhibits the psychological ache of a man outside the accepted and encouraged processes of thought and existence. If "man is nothing in particular...", a characteristic feared by man, a reality hidden behind and compensated by the constructs of civilization and her systems, Cross seeks meaning by abandoning the imprisoning perspectives of institutionalized marginalization and embraces the full potential of life uninhibited. Insiders seek power and spend their days maintaining it. Cross seeks meaning and *life*; the potential of which men fear because it cannot be overpowered and controlled.

Throughout the story, Cross rarely plans events and circumstances. He simply reacts to them. One of the most devastating blows to his psyche occurs when he realizes how his actions represent an insider's will to power. Cross' life is not a crusade, but a will to live; and live fully. Yet along his journey of actionable existentialism he suffers mightily. His life regurgitates the horrors of his existence onto every new circumstance. Then he wades in the simmering bile as his soul caramelizes. The conflict of Self and World wage a brutal campaign simply because Cross desires freedom from the effects of an outsider's status. But in pursuing this dream he realizes the inescapable connectedness of men and the world, how men constitute the world and the world constitutes men, and how even the conscious outsider, desiring freedom from the yokes of religion, social and political aspirations, civil promises, cannot stand loneliness. Whatever meaning Cross discovers rests in the ironic connectedness of people; people who seek nothing more than the organization of

life and a will to power.

What fate awaits the outsider? Perhaps a choice. To yearn for the enslavement of institutionalized illusion and exist, or to find purpose and freedom and *live*, though perhaps alone. The outsider either suffers an ignorant consciousness of the world around him, or an awakened, damning consciousness of the soul within himself and how it cannot exist as fully human within a system bent on power and afraid of its people's own potential and propensity toward life.

freckledbibliophile says

Absolutely engaging! There are so many emotional memories and moments tied to this book, I'll have to wait and write a summary.

4.5

Namrirru says

The story is like a resetting of Crime and Punishment. There's the main character, a young man who cuts off relations with his family, acts out of his own idealism and disenchantment with the world, commits murder more than once, tries to help the people he thinks are worth helping, then there's the sympathetic detective who has him figured out.

But it's different.

Richard Wright builds the story around different philosophies like Nietzsche and Heidegger, but he sets those philosophies up for failure. He has different views on society, power, socio-economic relationships, idealism and philosophy, but it's only in his negation of those other ideas that you come close to what he really believes. This is all wrapped up in the story and characters, really well done so it doesn't come off preachy.

At first I didn't like it because I took the main character rather literally, but then it became more apparent that this is a hypothetical character out of something from Nietzsche. With that, the reader can come up with his/her own conclusions about what the author believes and thinks.

It's a good novel. I recommend it.

Michael says

he took a lot of heat for this one because it departs in some ways from his earlier writings, especially for its scathing critique of the communist party and the white left and its exploration of existentialism. i think it's brilliant and deep thinking on violence, identity, victimization, political organizing, love, and the human condition.

Bernard says

Cross Damon, postier noir, père de famille, risque gros après avoir séduit une jeune fille de seize ans. L'opportunité d'échapper à ses ennuis et de recommencer une nouvelle vie s'offre à lui quand il passe pour mort dans un accident de métro. Reconnu par un ancien collègue, il le tue et fuit Chicago pour New-York sous une nouvelle identité. Il y rencontre un groupe communiste auquel il s'intègre, mais est contraint de tuer à deux reprises encore. Un procureur s'attachera à cerner la personnalité complexe de Damon dans un face à face final étourdissant. Publié en 1953 et souvent considéré comme un des premiers romans existentialistes américains (Richard Wright s'était lié à Sartre à Paris), le Transfuge met en scène un personnage avide de liberté au-delà de toute morale, mais malmené par des circonstances dont il n'est que le jouet. Un être soucieux de sérénité mais qui se transforme en instrument de terreur. Un penseur sans idées, qui ne trouve nul écho à ses questions dans une société qui le broie : "Ne dira-t-on pas que tout l'effort de l'homme sur la terre pour construire une civilisation est seulement l'effort désespéré que fait l'homme pour se dissimuler à lui-même ? (...) La vie humaine n'est-elle pas qu'une sorte de peur glacée qu'a l'homme de ce qu'il lui serait possible d'être ?" Le procureur qui l'interroge, tout de lucidité et d'empathie, n'est pas loin de partager la détresse existentielle de son suspect : "Toute ma vie j'ai été hanté par le sentiment que cette vie que nous vivons était feinte, et j'en ai été d'autant plus meurtri qu'elle EST une feinte. Et malheur à celui qui essaie de révéler cette feinte ! C'est lui le criminel..." Damon finira par confesser ses crimes mais aura ces ultimes paroles: "... je suis innocent... C'est cela qui a été l'horreur"...

Seri says

Great novel by 1950's Harlem Renaissance black writer Richard Wright. It's an expressly philosophical book that includes the ideas of Nietzsche, Sartre, Kierkegaard and more. The story of a black existentialist bordering on nihilism who is torn between fascists and communists. It blurs the line between a pulpy crime story and a high-literary novel.

All my praise.

Reginald says

A shocking turn a quarter of the way through leads you barreling through the type of experience whose joy we all might seemingly identify with. Good Read.

Vel Veeter says

Because I recently read *Invisible Man* again and it's long and draining and pretty much exactly from the same year as this book, I thought I would journal about this book as I am reading for a somewhat different sense of it.

Section 1:

Pages 1-150:

This book starts off with a group of friends bullshitting in the street. As Cross Damon makes away from his group, he starts to feel a deeply encroaching stress and pressure take hold of him. We are subject to this stress from a close narrative, third-person voice and so as with the protagonist, we feel a similar feeling of pressure and claustrophobia.

As we move past this scene, we start to realize that Cross Damon is not a good man. He has impregnated his mistress, is about to find out she's 15 (he's 26), and he's going to try to coerce her to abort the child so she can't prosecute him for rape.

Richard Wright has never had much interest in having us like or sympathize with his protagonists.

"Negroes rolled in laughter, feeling that the powerful white world had been lowered to their own humble plane by the magic of comic words. One black boy danced ecstatically, then, holding his hands over his mouth as though he felt it unseemly to vent his savage mirth indoors, ran out of the cafe, leaving the door open. Upon the snowy sidewalk he screamed and howled and flapped his arms in the icy wind. For a moment he paused, then ran back to the door and, gasping for breath, said:

'Man, that's sure cool!' He lifted his eyes to the grey sky. 'You colored brother on Mars, come on down here and help us!'"

This first section hits a real kind of "Oh crap!" moment early on and the weird tension and closed in feeling evaporate. It's a strange sensation to take a character so objectively not good and have us root for his relief so that we can experience it as well. Part of this pacing and structure comes from the fact that there are no breaks in the first 150 pages....it's just straight action and narration. No chapters, no section breaks. Nothing.

Section 2: p 149-265

"He found that he had been deprived of the will to make decisions, that he had, by his flight, abandoned himself to be tossed and buffeted by the tyranny of daily minutia. Thrust thus back upon himself, his actions were snared in a web of self-love that made the images of his mind assume a hypnotic sway over his body that was more decisive than the food he ate to sustain himself."

As the novel progresses, Cross Damon finds a way to sow chaos into every aspect of his life. As people get in his way, he takes care of them. I am always fake surprised when I read a Richard Wright novel when it delves in to a treatise on Communism. *Black Boy* does this as soon as it moves away from the first half in pretty direct means. *Native Son* does it much less direct ways. *Uncle Tom's Children* does avoid this kind of descent but does so at the cost of showing a depraved representation of black life in America.

In this novel, it becomes a false messiah, as it does in *Invisible Man*.

Section 3: 265-310

"Cross rose and went out of the room, his eyes avoiding Bob who sobbed on the floor. he had no appetite, but he sat at the table and Eva served him. As he chewed his food, he heard Gil's voice rising in accusation, then Bob's voice falling in meek pleas. Then a pause during which Bob coughed loudly. Finally there was a

sound of footsteps in the hallway. Gil was saying something to Bob at the door, then the door closed. Cross looked at Eva; her eyes were full of fear, and her hand shook slightly as she ate. Gil came briskly to the table, sat, keeping his eyes in front of him. He volunteered no information and acted as though he knew that no one would dare ask for any."

In this section we see how ruthless and single-minded Communism is, especially for Black America, whose specific issues are not great concerns for the Party. It would feel tempting to see this as a place to compare these events to current Leftist politics, but Wright is specifically suggesting that it is an absolutism, not liberalism that is the root of the problem, the desire for power as an end to itself, not an ideology to blame. His characters don't suggest that Communism is a pure ideal either, but mostly a means.

Section 4: 310-500

"The seductions of vanity have lured countless men to destinies that have confounded them, left them straightened and undone. After an arduous journey of experience it is not good to stare in dismay at a world that one was creating without being aware of it, and there is no chastening of the spirit so severely sobering as that rankling sense of guilt that springs from a knowledge of having been snares into the mire of disillusionment when one thought that one was soaring on wings of intellectual pride to a freedom remote from the errors and frailties of the gullible. At times there comes into the lives of men realizations so paralyzing that, for the first time, their hands reach out fumblingly for the touch of another human being."

Cross is a sociopath at times, but he is convinced of his emotional sense. I think more so in the novel he is portrayed like someone cornered into lashing out, and this includes, at some points, lashing out against censure, not just threats of life.

Section 5: 501-585

"Cross found himself in the uniquely ironic position of comprehending far more keenly than his captors the nature and meaning of the situation confronting him. Even while the care in which he sat huddled between the two detectives bore him toward the office of the District Attorney, he could anticipate the general methods and approach of the police. They had first to prove who he was. Well, let them; that was their business, not his..."

In this final section we and Cross are confronted by his masking and deception. But as the above passage suggests, being the outside and deceiving the insiders (of the Party, of Society) he has the keen observation post, and the intelligence to way in heavily of the various illusions he himself is not a party to.

As I finished the novel, like with other Richard Wright books, I am not sure what to make of it and have to work through my sense of its meaning, how it positions Black men (and women) in America. I am always a little horrified by my own confusions, but oh well, I guess that's the point.
